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TAGS: [KIRF](#) [PHUM](#) [SCUL](#) [SOCI](#) [EINV](#) [CASC](#) [PREL](#) [LA](#)
SUBJECT: INTOLERANCE FOR CHRISTIANS PERSISTS IN LAOS

REF: A. 07 VIENTIANE 167

- [1](#)B. 07 VIENTIANE 138
- [1](#)C. 07 VIENTIANE 105
- [1](#)D. 07 VIENTIANE 86

Classified By: Ambassador Patricia M. Haslach for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Christians in Bolikhamsay Province's Nakun Village have faced pressure from local officials and have been "reeducated" numerous times as a result of their religious activities. Christians in Xunya Village, Luang Namtha Province, have reportedly been prevented from practicing their faith, although the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) recently intervened to try to help. Twelve ethnic Khmu Christians jailed since late 2006 remain incarcerated. The status of Mr. Khamstone, the possibly detained Christian employee of American company Natural Products International (NPI), remains unknown, and efforts to obtain information from provincial and central government officials have not been effective. The Government of Laos (GoL) has indicated that there is no reason to return a church that was confiscated from Christians in Savannakhet Province in 2000. Savannakhet officials argue that there is an insufficient number of Christians in the village to warrant having a church. Overall, the past year has been a difficult period for Christians in many areas of Laos. End Summary.

Nakun Village Christians

[1](#)2. (U) In March, a French-based Lao exile group accused officials in Nakun Village, Bolikhamsay Province, of persecuting the local Christian community. The group alleged that a low-level government committee made up of village officials and at least one district official had been established to eliminate Christianity from the area. According to a Radio Free Asia report, Lao Ministry of Foreign Affairs Spokesperson Mr. Yong Chanthalangsy had claimed that tensions in the village were due to the movement of new people into the village and that tensions developed because of differences in religious beliefs and methods of farming. He noted that the government had formed a mediation committee to help the groups work out their differences. When questioned whether or not the Christians had been asked to renounce their beliefs, he was quoted as saying that this was merely incitement employed by people who want to make trouble and that Lao officials never repress people.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Two Lao civil documents about the Nakun situation were recently circulated among concerned religious groups in the United States. One of the documents, prepared by local officials, indicated that the villagers should move out of

the village to an area where there is an existing church and indicated that they would not be granted permission to build a church in their own village. The document also states that (as the Christians apparently acknowledged) the Christians in the village had used cassette tapes as a tool to spread religion. Lao law forbids proselytizing. In a second document, which was apparently written by the Christian community on what appears to be official government letterhead, the Christians indicated that Lao authorities at all levels had advised them that believing in God is not a good thing and that such beliefs are "the enemy's tactics which will destroy the nation." While the Christian community apparently asked local officials to sign the document as acknowledgement, no official signatures appear on the document.

¶4. (C) On March 30 PolOff met with Pastor Saykham of the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC). Pastor Saykham confirmed reports that Christians in Nakun Village had been asked to give up their beliefs and had been asked to leave the village. However, he informed PolOff that he did not consider the situation in Nakun Village to be as significant as religious problems in some other parts of Laos. He argued that, because most of those responsible for repressing Christians in Nakun Village were village-level officials, the chances that the problems would be resolved by higher level intervention were good. Nevertheless, he remarked that the government has not yet done anything substantive to resolve the issue.

LEC Says Other Areas More Worrisome

¶5. (C) Pastor Saykham remarked during the March 30 meeting that five ethnic Yao Christians who had been arrested in Luang Namtha Province in 2006 have now been out of jail for more than three months (Ref C). Despite their release, Saykham said they have not been allowed to worship. He also noted that a Christian elder in Luang Namtha Province's Xunya Village had recently died, and district officials would not allow Christians in the village to hold a Christian funeral service. Representatives of the Lao Front for National Construction (LFNC) told the Ambassador during a late February meeting that they had visited Xunya Village and that religious issues there had been resolved (Ref A). According to Saykham, however, the problems intensified in March, and district-level officials had taken steps to prevent Christians in Xunya from worshipping.

¶6. (C) A small group of Yao (also known as Mien) representatives of the United Christians Overseas Mission from the United States, accompanied by two LEC representatives, attempted to visit Xunya Village in early April. However, local police and military reportedly blocked the group from visiting the village. During an April 9 meeting, Saykham told PolOff that the LFNC in Vientiane issued a document on April 2 supporting the right of Christians in Xunya Village to worship. The document was reportedly sent to LFNC and police officials in Luang Namtha Province on April 6. While he did not expect a total resolution of religious issues in the village, Saykham was hopeful that official intervention from the LFNC in Vientiane via provincial officials would serve to improve the situation.

¶7. (C) Saykham informed PolOff that Christians in Houaphan Province have increasingly had difficulties with both village and district-level officials. He indicated that three Christian households in Punhong Village, Xiang Kho District, had been told by village and district officials to give up their faith or leave the village. Returning to Bolikhamsay Province, Saykham noted that in Nam Deua Village, Pakading District, Christians had also been told by both village and district officials that they cannot believe in Christianity because it is an American religion. He noted that they have been threatened with expulsion but that none have been expelled to date. There are reportedly more than 100 Christians in the village.

Khmu Christians Jailed in Vientiane Province

18. (C) Twelve ethnic Khmu Christians have been held in prison or police detention centers in Vientiane Province since November 2006 when they participated in a religious celebration that was attended by foreigners (Ref C). The three pastors within the group of 12 have reportedly been held at Thong Harb Prison, while nine others have been held at a police detention facility. During the April 9 meeting Saykham repeated that the LFNC and the Prime Minister's Office had approved their release several weeks ago. However, he said the Governor of Vientiane Province remains the obstacle to securing their release. One of the nine held in the police detention center has been allowed to leave detention for a few days periodically to seek medical care, most recently on April 8. The Ambassador requested that the LFNC provide an update on the group's status but has not received a substantive response.

American Company Employee

19. (C) The whereabouts and status of Mr. Khamstone, a Christian employee of American company Natural Products International (NPI), remain unknown since his arrest in Oudomsay Province in January (Refs B and D). PolOffs met with the Chairman of NPI on April 5 to discuss Khamstone's status. He informed us that he and Khamstone's wife had met with a Lao attorney in Vientiane to discuss the case. After asking Khamstone's wife a few questions, the attorney told NPI's Chairman that the case was too sensitive and potentially dangerous and refused to accept the case. Noting that he had heard of an office within the National Assembly that is set up to take citizen complaints against officials, the NPI President indicated that Khamstone's wife was considering sending a petition to that office. (Note: The Ambassador and Deputy Chief of Mission have raised this case with representatives of the LFNC as well as with the Director-General of the Europe-Americas Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on several occasions. The Resident Representative of the World Food Program, which purchases NPI products, has also raised the issue with the Governors of Luang Prabang and Oudomsay Provinces. End Note).

Dong Nong Khun Church Remains a Government Office

10. (SBU) During his January visit to Laos, former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for Religious Freedom Robert Seiple raised the issue of a church that was confiscated by local officials in Savannakhet Province in 2000 (Ref C). Seiple was told by Deputy Prime Minister Somsavat Lengsavad that he would involve himself in making sure the situation was addressed. The Embassy contacted the LFNC in February to determine if the church had been returned to the Christian congregation. The LFNC responded by sending the Embassy a handwritten note from an official in Savannakhet Province indicating that the village has no need for a church because the number of Christians in the village is insufficient to warrant a church. The note suggested that the Christians attend another church two kilometers away. (Note: The church two kilometers away in Keng Kok Village was once confiscated for government use as well but was returned to the Christian community following one of Ambassador Seiple's previous visits. End Note). The note also stated that there are only 20 Christians in Dong Nong Khun Village, a significant difference from the 130 reported to PolOff when visiting the area in January.

Comment

11. (C) Despite some positive developments in regard to religious freedom beginning in 2002, the overall situation appears to have regressed in the past year. Rather than using the Prime Minister's 2002 Decree 92 on Religious Freedom as a means to promote religious freedom, Lao officials have increasingly used the decree as a means to restrict religious practice on the village level and to forbid the construction of churches. For the resolution of

low-level religious issues, the LFNC has demonstrated occasional willingness to encourage local, district, and provincial officials to allow citizens the right to worship, although sometimes without success. However, the government has treated Christians who are seen as too influential as "threats" to national security. This may be what is behind Mr. Khamson's apparent detention. In such cases, both Prime Minister's Decree 92 on Religious Freedom and broader constitutional protections have had little effect.

HASLACH